Moments of Truth

Living with War, Striving for Peace

by Ehud Barak

Night Flight

They say that you can read a person's feelings on his face. But if so, either I'm a very good actor – the opposite of what anyone who has worked closely with me would tell you – or the journalists clustered in front of me weren't very good face-readers. They said that I looked defeated. Distressed. *Depressed*.

Yet as I delivered my brief final statement outside an olive-green cabin at Camp David, the American presidential retreat in the densely wooded Catoctin hills north of Washington, I felt none of those things.

Yes, I was disappointed. I realised that what had happened over the last 14 days, or more crucially what had *not* happened, was bound to have serious consequences, both for me personally, as Prime Minister of Israel, and for my country.

But I had been a politician, at that point, for all of five years. By far most of my life, I had spent in uniform. As a teenager, small and slight and not even shaving yet, I was one of the founding core of a unit called *Sayeret Matkal*, Israel's equivalent of the Green Berets, or Britain's SAS. It may be that the way I thought and acted, the way I dealt with danger or with crises, came from someplace inside me. Even as a young kid, I was always quiet, serious, contemplative. But my 14 years as a part of Israel's main special-forces unit, especially once I became its commander, etched those qualities more deeply. And they added new ones: a sense that you could never plan a mission too carefully or prepare too assiduously; an understanding that what you thought, and certainly what you said, mattered a lot less than what you *did*. And above all the realisation that, when one of our nighttime commando operations was over, whether it had succeeded or failed, you had to take a step back. Evaluate things accurately, coolly, without illusions. Then, in the light of how the situation had changed, you had to decide how best to move forward.

That approach, to the occasional frustration of the politicians and diplomats working alongside me during this critical stage of Israel's history, had guided me from the moment I became Prime Minister. In my very first discussions with President Clinton a year earlier – a long weekend, beginning at the White House and moving on to Camp David – I had mapped out at great length, in great detail, every one of the steps I knew we would have to take to confront the central issue facing Israel: the need for peace.

In choosing to return, now, to Camp David for two weeks of summit talks, I knew the risks. Of all the moments of truth in my life – and in the life of my

country – few, if any, would carry higher stakes. Success would mean not just one more stutter-step away from our century-long conflict with the Palestinians. It would signal a real, final peace: in treaty-speak, *end of conflict*. Whatever the complexities of putting an agreement into practice, given all the suffering and bloodshed endured by both sides, we would have crossed a point of no return.

There would be two states, for two peoples.

And if we failed? I knew, if only from months of increasingly stark intelligence reports, that an explosion of Palestinian violence – not just with stones or bottles this time, but with guns and explosives – would be only a matter of time.

I knew something else as well. This would be a moment of truth not just for me. Or for Bill Clinton, a man who understood our conflict more deeply, and was more determined to help us end it, than any other president before him. It was a moment of truth for the leader of the Palestinians, Yasir Arafat.

The Oslo Accords of 1993, groundbreaking though they were, had created a peace *process*, not peace. Over the past few years, that process had been lurching from crisis to crisis. Political support for negotiations was fraying. And yet the core issues of our conflict had not been resolved. In fact, they had hardly been talked about. The reason for this was no secret. For both sides, these questions lay at the heart of everything we'd been saying for years, to the world and to ourselves, about the roots of the conflict and the minimum terms we could accept in order to end it. At issue were rival claims on security, final borders, Israeli settlements, Palestinian refugees, and the future of ancient city of Jerusalem. None of these could be resolved without painful, and politically perilous, compromises.

Entering the summit, despite the pressures ahead, I was confident that I, with my team of aides and negotiators, would do our part to make such a final peace agreement possible. Nor did I doubt that President Clinton, whom I had come to view not just as a diplomatic partner but a friend, would rise to the occasion.

But as for Arafat? There was simply no way of knowing.

That was why I had pressed President Clinton so hard to convene the summit. That was why, despite the misgivings of some of his closest advisers, he had taken the plunge. We both knew that the so-called "final-status issues" – the substance of any real peace – could not simply be put off forever. Untangling them was getting harder, not easier. And we realised that only in an environment

like Camp David – a "pressure cooker" was how I described it to Clinton, and to US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright – would we ever discover whether a peace deal could in fact be done.

Now, we knew.

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Israel's equivalent of Air Force One, perhaps in a nod to our country's pioneering early years, was an almost prehistoric Boeing 707. It was waiting on the runway at Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington to ferry me and the rest of our negotiating team back home.

It contained a low-rent equivalent of the American version's presidential cabin, and a few 1960s-vintage first-class seats, but consisted mostly of two long lines of coach seats, three abreast, separated by an almost tightrope-narrow aisle. I dare say I was alone in finding an odd sense of comfort in boarding the plane. This museum piece of an aircraft was part of my past. It was the same model of 707 for which I, with a couple of other young soldiers and engineers, had come up with what we dubbed the "submarine door" system outside the cockpit – to protect El Al pilots from future attacks after one of its planes had been hijacked to Algiers in the summer of 1968. It was also the same kind of plane – a Sabena flight, hijacked to Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport – which I stormed, before sunrise, four years later with a force of nearly two dozen *Matkal* commandos. The shooting was over within 90 seconds. One of my men – a junior officer named Bibi Netanyahu – was wounded. By one of our own bullets. But we managed to kill two of the heavily armed hijackers, capture the others, and free all 90 passengers unharmed.

Still, even I had to accept, it was no fun to fly on.

As we banked eastward after takeoff and headed out over the Atlantic, the mood on board was sober. Huddling with the inner core of my negotiating team – my policy co-ordinator Gilead Sher, security aide Danny Yatom and Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami – I could see that the way the summit ended had hit them hard. It was probably true, as all three often reminded me, that the greatest pressure fell on me. I was the one who ultimately decided what we could, or should, offer in search of a true peace with the Palestinians. I was the one who would be blamed by the inevitable critics, whether for going too far or not far

enough, or simply for the fact the deal had eluded us. I knew the drill: the same thing had happened when I had come tantalisingly close to finalising a peace deal with Syria's then-dying dictator, Hafez al-Assad, a few months earlier. Yet these three dedicated men – Gili, who was by training a lawyer; Shlomo, an academic; and Danny, a former Mossad chief – had just been through dozens of hours of intricately detailed talks with each of Arafat's top negotiators at Camp David, not to mention the dozens of other meetings before we had even got there. Now they had to accept that, even with the lid of the pressure cooker bolted down tight, we had fallen short of getting the peace agreement which each of us knew had been within touching distance.

I don't think that even they could be described as depressed. On our side, after all, we knew we had given ground on every issue we possibly could, without facing full-scale political rebellion at home. We had proposed an Israeli pullout from nearly all of the West Bank and Gaza. A support mechanism for helping compensate tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the serial Arab-Israeli conflicts of the past half-century. And most painfully and controversially – my rivals and critics back home were already accusing me of "treachery" – we had offered the Palestinians sovereignty over the Arab neighbourhoods of Jerusalem as well as custodianship over the Haram al-Sharif, the mosque complex perched above the Western Wall, the holiest site in Judaism.

But precisely because we had been ready to offer so much, only for Arafat to reject it all, even as a *basis* for talks on a final deal, I could sense how gutted my key negotiators were feeling.

Still, I'm sure none of them was surprised when my own old operational instincts kicked in. In my statement to journalists, I had been careful to say that Arafat was not ready *at this time* to make the historic compromises needed for peace. But before parting with President Clinton and Secretary Albright, I'd been more forthright. It was clear, without my saying so, that the chances of our getting a peace agreement on Clinton's watch were now pretty much over. He had barely five months left in office. Yet my deeper fear was that with Arafat having brushed aside an offer that went far further than any other Israeli had proposed – far further than the Americans, themselves, had expected from Israel – the prospects for peace would be set back for years. Perhaps, I said, for two decades.

The challenge now, I told my exhausted team, was to make sure we were prepared for this new reality. Part of the spadework was already in place. Much

as I'd hoped that Arafat and I could turn a new page in Middle East history, I had directed our army chief-of-staff, nine months before the summit, to draw up contingency plans for the likelihood of an unprecedentedly deadly eruption of Palestinian violence if we were to fail.

Now, I felt we had to go even further, and to prepare a proactive alternative to the negotiated deal we'd been unable to secure. I proposed considering a *unilateral* Israeli pullout from the West Bank and Gaza. The territorial terms would, necessarily, be less far-reaching than the proposal Arafat had rejected. But I felt we should still withdraw from the great majority of the land we had captured in 1967, still leaving the Palestinians an area which the outside world would recognise as wholly sufficient for them to establish a viable, successful state.

And crucially, this would finally give Israel, *our* country, a delineated, final border with the territory captured in the Six-Day War.

Gili, clearly uneasy about accepting the idea that the chances for a negotiated peace were definitively gone, left to try to get some sleep on the long flight ahead. Danny and Shlomo Ben-Ami as well. Within an hour or so, the plane was full of irregularly slumped bodies, the silence broken only by the drone of the 707's engines and the occasional sound of snoring.

I sat, wide awake, in one of the seats at the front.

My sleeping habits were another inheritance from *Sayeret Matkal*. During those years, nearly everything of significance which I did had happened after sundown. The commando operations were, of course, set for darkness whenever possible. The element of surprise could mean the difference between success and failure, indeed life and death. But all of my planning, all my *thinking*, tended to happen at night as well. The quiet, and the lack of distractions, helped to discipline my mind. I found that it helped to free my mind as well, sometimes only to discover that it went off in unexpected directions.

It did so now. Perhaps even I was still reluctant to accept that Camp David meant that the opportunity for a transformative deal with Arafat was finished. Yet whatever the reason, I began thinking back to the first time that my path and his had crossed. It was in the spring of 1968, nearly a year after Israel had defeated the armies of our three main Arab enemies – Egypt, Syria and Jordan. Israeli forces were advancing on a Jordanian town called Karameh, across the Jordan River from the West Bank, from which a fledgling group called Fatah, under the command of Arafat, had been staging a series of raids. In one of their most

recent attacks, they'd planted land mines, one of which destroyed an Israeli schoolbus, killing the driver and one of the teachers and injuring nearly a dozen children. The so-called Battle of Karameh was our single most significant operation since the 1967 war. In pure military terms, it succeeded. But at a price: more than two dozen Israeli soldiers dead. It also had a major political impact. It caused shock among many Israelis, still wrapped in a sense of invincibility from the Six-Day War, as well as a feeling in the Arab world, actively encouraged by Arafat and his comrades, that compared to the great armies Israel had defeated in 1967, Fatah had at least shown fight. Fatah had drawn blood.

I had just turned 26 years old. I was finishing my studies in math, physics and economics at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and had joined my *Sayeret Matkal* comrades the night before the assault. It was a huge operation: ten battalions, including crack infantry units. Our own role was relatively minor. We were to seal the southern entrance to the town. But it proved a tough slog just to get there. Our vehicles got bogged down in mud. By the time we arrived, Fatah fighters, although many were in civilian clothes so we couldn't be sure, were racing past us in the other direction. One of them, we were later told, was Yasir Arafat. On a motorcycle.

It would be nearly three decades before the two of us actually met – shortly after the assassination of my longtime comrade and friend Yitzhak Rabin, when I had become Foreign Minister under Shimon Peres. But in the intervening years, Arafat was rarely off of my radar. By the early 1970s, he and his fighters had been expelled by King Hussein's army from Jordan and were re-based in Lebanon. Arafat was becoming a significant figure on the Arab and world political stage, and an increasingly uncomfortable thorn in Israel's side. I was head of *Sayeret Matkal* by then. Over a period of months, I drew up a carefully constructed plan – a raid by helicopter into a Fatah-dominated area in southeastern Lebanon, during one of Arafat's intermittent, morale-boosting visits from Beirut – to assassinate him. My immediate superior, the army's head of operations, was all for our doing it. But the chief of military intelligence said no. Arafat, he insisted when we met to discuss the plan, was no longer the lean, mean fighter we had encountered in Karameh. "He's fat. He's a politician. He is not a target."

A decade later, the idea would suddenly resurface. In my first meeting, as a newly promoted Major General, with our then Defence Minister Ariel Sharon, Sharon turned to me and the army's Chief of Staff, Rafael Eitan, and said: "Tell

me. Why the hell is Arafat still alive?" He looked first at Raful, then at me, and added: "When I was 20 years younger than you are, I *never* waited for someone like Ben-Gurion or Dayan to ask me to plan an operation. I would plan it! Then I'd take it to them and say, you're the politicians, you decide, but if you say yes, we'll do it." I smiled, telling him that I'd done exactly that, a decade earlier, only to have one of his mates in the top brass say no. Sharon now said yes. But the plan was overtaken: by his ill-fated plan to launch a full-scale invasion of Lebanon in 1982, targeting not just Arafat, but with the aim of crushing the PLO militarily once and for all.

I finally met Arafat face-to-face at the end of 1995. Although the Oslo peace process had dramatically changed things, it was clear that the real prize – real peace – was still far away. We were in Barcelona, for a Euro-Mediterranean meeting under the auspices of King Juan Carlos, aimed at trying to re-invigorate negotiations. The ceremonial centrepiece of the event was a dinner at one of the royal palaces, and it was arranged for me and Arafat to meet for a few minutes beforehand. I arrived first. I found myself in a breathtakingly opulent, but otherwise empty, room. Empty, that is, except for a dark-brown Steinway piano. From childhood, I have loved music. And while I am never likely to threaten the career of anyone in the New York Philharmonic, I have, over the years, developed some ability, and drawn huge enjoyment, as a classical pianist. I pulled back the red-velvet bench and began to play. With my back to the doorway, I was unaware that Arafat had arrived, and that he was soon standing only a few feet away, watching as I played one of my favourite pieces, a Chopin waltz. My old commando antennae must have been blunted. I may not have become "fat". But, undeniably, I was now a politician.

When I finally realised Arafat was behind me, I turned, embarrassed, stood up, and grasped his hand. "It's a real pleasure to meet you," I said. "I must say I have spent many years watching you – by other means." He smiled. We stood talking for about 10 minutes. My hope was to establish simple, human contact; to signal respect; to begin to create the conditions not to try to kill Arafat, but to make peace with him. "We carry a great responsibility," I said. "Both of our peoples have paid a heavy price, and the time has come to find a way to solve this."

I sensed, at the time, at least the start of some connection. I suspected that Arafat viewed me, as he had Rabin before me, as a "fellow fighter". But if so, I now wondered whether that might have been part of the problem in his ever truly understanding my mission at Camp David. My motivations. Or my mind.

Even in Israel, my reputation as a soldier has sometimes been as much a burden as an advantage. A whole body of stories has followed me from my 36 years in uniform – a career which, after *Sayeret Matkal*, led me up the military ladder until I was head of operations, intelligence, and eventually of the entire army as Chief of Staff. By the time I left the military, I was the single most decorated soldier in our country's history. Some of the stories were actually true: that when we burst onto the hijacked Sabena airliner, for instance, we were dressed as a maintenance crew; or that, in leading an assassination raid in Beirut against the PLO group that had murdered Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, I was disguised as a woman. Not the most attractive young lady, perhaps, though I did, painfully, pluck my eyelashes, and, with the help of four pairs of standard-issue Israeli Army socks, develop quite a comely bosom. I rejected the idea of wearing a long dress, in favour of stylishly flared trousers. I was going on a commando operation, after all, not a prom date. But I did wear heels. So yes, a woman, of sorts.

Yet some of the stories were just plain myth. I had given up counting the times I'd heard about my alleged prowess in recording the fastest-ever time on the most gruelling of the Israeli army's obstacle courses. In fact, I was a lot more like Goldie Hawn in *Private Benjamin*.

The main misunderstanding, however, went deeper. The assumption appeared to be that my military achievements, especially in *Sayeret Matkal*, were down to a mix of brute force and raw courage. Courage, of course, was a requirement: the willingness to take risks, if the rewards for success, or the costs of inaction, were great enough. Few of the operations I fought in or commanded were without the real danger of not coming back alive. But whatever success I'd had as a soldier, particularly in *Matkal*, was not only, nor even mainly, about biceps. It was about brains. The ability to make decisions. To withstand the pressure of often having to make the most crucial decisions within a matter of seconds. It was, above all, about thinking and analyzing – and always, always, looking and planning ahead.

And as our plane droned onward towards Israel, I knew that I would now need all of those qualities more than ever.

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This book is only in part the story of my life – a life that, from my beginnings as a kibbutz boy in pre-state Palestine, has been intimately entwined with the infancy and adolescence and, now, the increasingly troubled middle age of the State of Israel.

Still less is it only a record of its, or my, achievements, although they are inevitably a part of the story.

In setting out to write it, I was also determined to document, from the inside, the critical setbacks as well. Mistakes. Misjudgements. Missed opportunities. And the lessons that we can, and must, be prepared to learn from them.

No less so than I when I was planning a hijack rescue or a cross-border commando operation in *Sayeret Matkal*, I remain convinced that Israel's security, Israel's very identity, can be safeguarded only by evaluating dispassionately the situation in our country and the world. And by looking ahead.

Even when I was a soldier, I never stopped thinking this way, especially when, first as military intelligence chief and especially as Chief of Staff, I knew, in detail, every one of the security threats that faced Israel and was part of discussions and decisions to try to confront them. I still vividly remember as Chief of Staff, every Friday before the arrival of the Jewish Sabbath, sitting with Rabin, who was then Israel's Defence Minister. Our offices were along the same hallway of the *Kirya*, the ministry's headquarters in the heart of Tel Aviv. Rabin had a very low table in his office, with two chairs. We would sit across from each other, each with a ready supply of coffee and Yitzhak smoking an apparently endless supply of cigarettes, and we would just talk. Politics. Strategy. Israel. The PLO. The surrounding Arab states. And the wider world.

Many years before I became Prime Minister, I gave a lecture at a memorial meeting for an Israeli academic. Not many people were there. I doubt even they remember it. But I do, because what I said has, sadly, become more prophetic than even I could have imagined. I talked about the imperative for peace as part of Israel's security. There was a "window," I said. We were militarily strong. In regional terms, we were a superpower. But politically, resolving the conflict with our Arab enemies would almost certainly become more difficult with time. Iraq, perhaps Iran and other Middle Eastern states, might get nuclear weapons. A violent form of fundamentalist Islam could, over time, erode existing Arab and Muslim states, threatening Israel of course, but also the stability of our neighbourhood and of the world. In those circumstances, even if an Israeli government was strong enough, wise enough, forward-looking enough to pursue

avenues for negotiated peace with its immediate neighbours, getting the popular support required would be all but impossible.

The window is still there. But it is only barely open.

I fear that I was right, as well, in predicting that our failure to secure a final peace agreement with the Palestinians at Camp David might set back peacemaking not just for a few months, but for many years. I have persisted in trying, very hard, to make that particular prediction prove wrong. That was why, despite intense pressure from my own political allies not to do so, I decided to return to government in 2007 as Defence Minister. I remained in that role for six years: mostly in the current, right-wing Likud government of my onetime *Sayeret Matkal* charge, Bibi Netanyahu.

Much of what I say in this book about war and peace, security and Israel's future challenges, will make uncomfortable reading for Bibi. But very little of it will surprise him, or his own Likud rivals further to the right, like Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and the Economy Minister, Naftali Bennett. I have said almost all of it to them behind closed doors in the past few years, more than once. When I finally decided to leave the political arena last year, it was largely because I realized that they were guided by other imperatives. In the case of Bibi, the most gifted politician with whom I've worked except for Clinton, the priority was to stay in power. For Avigdor and Naftali, it was to supplant Bibi, when the opportunity was ripe, as Likud leader and as Prime Minister. And much too often – as with their hugely ill-advised recent proposal to amend Israel's basic law to define it explicitly as a Jewish state, and deny "national rights" to non-Jews – the three of them have ended up competing for party political points rather than weighing the serious future implications for the country.

Peacemaking, as I discovered first-hand, requires taking risks. Statesmanship requires risks. Politics, especially if defined simply as staying in power, is almost always about the avoidance of risk.

The problem for Israel, no matter who or what party is in government, is that there are risks everywhere one looks, and they show every sign of getting more, not less, serious.

The "Arab Spring" has morphed into an Islamic winter. National frontiers that were put in place by British and French diplomats after the fall of the Ottoman Empire are vanishing. Centuries-old conflicts between tribes and rival religious communities have reignited. The old Cold War system of nations has given way

to a world without a single geopolitical centre of gravity. Perhaps most seriously, Iran seems determined to get nuclear weapons, and, in my view, may succeed in doing so.

Where Israel is concerned, relations with our indisputably most important ally, the United States, are more strained than at any time in decades. Diplomatic ties with Europe, our single largest trading partner, have been growing steadily worse. And the only real certainty is that anyone who tells you that they know absolutely where things are heading next is lying. Just ask Hosni Mubarak, who, despite having nearly half-a-million soldiers and security operatives at his disposal, was utterly blindsided, and very soon toppled and imprisoned, by an uprising that began with a sudden show of popular anger in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Internally as well, Israel faces dangers. Chief among them is the alarming erosion of the standards of civil discourse, amid the increasingly shrill, often hateful, divisions between left and right, secular and religious, rich and poor and, most seriously of all, Jews and Arabs. While we remain economically successful, the fruits of our wealth are being ever more unevenly shared, and the prospects for continued growth constrained by the lack of any visible prospect of long-term peace.

Bibi Netanyahu, of course, knows all of this. Indeed, he has repeatedly spoken of the multiple threats Israel faces, not only in somber terms, but at times almost apocalyptically.

That works, politically. Politicians, not just in Israel but everywhere, know that it is a lot easier to win elections on fear than on hope.

Yet my own prescription – learned, as this book recounts, from years on the battlefield, then reinforced by my years in government – is that Israel must resist being guided by either of those alternatives. Not fear, certainly. But neither by simple, untempered hope. Though the stakes have become much higher since my night flight back from Camp David nearly 15 years ago, our need remains what I tried to impress on my negotiators then: realism. A meticulously informed, utterly unvarnished, understanding of the threats we face, of each altered situation after every success or a failure, and an ability to set aside the background noise and political pressures and chart a way forward.

So what is that way? It begins with the mindset. On more than one occasion in the past few years, after Prime Minister Netanyahu had warned our country of a nuclear Iran or the spread of Al Qaeda-style hatred and violence, as if

prophesying the coming of Armageddon, I would say to him: “Stop talking like that. You’re not delivering a sermon in a synagogue. You’re Prime Minister.” Having been privileged to live my own life along with the entire modern history of our country, I went further. Zionism, the founding architecture of Israel, was rooted in finding a way to supplant not just the life, but the way of thinking, which hard-pressed Jewish communities had internalised over centuries in the diaspora: in Hebrew, the *galut*. We would instead take control of our own destiny, building and developing and securing our own country.

Now, I told Bibi, he was back in the mindset of the *galut*. Yes, al-Qaeda, and more recently Islamic State, were real dangers. The prospect of a nuclear Iran was even more so. “But the implication of the way you speak, not just to Barack Obama or David Cameron, but to *Israelis*, is that these are existential threats. What do you imagine? That if, God forbid, we wake up and Iran is a nuclear power, we’ll pack up and go back to the *shtetls* of Europe?”

Of course not. Israel, as my public life has taught me more than most, remains strong militarily. We are, still, fully capable of turning back any of the undeniable threats on our doorstep. Keeping that strength, developing it and modernizng it, are obviously critically important. But as Israel’s founding Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, used to say, the success of Zionism, and of the Israeli state, required two things: strength and “righteousness.” He didn’t mean the word in purely religious terms. He meant that Israel, if it were to retain international backing and internal cohesion, must be guided by a core of moral assumptions as well.

That, in itself, would be reason enough to pursue every possible opportunity for “end of conflict” with our neighbours. And, at home, to protect and re-inforce our commitment to Israel as both a Jewish and a democratic state. But Israel’s simple self-interest – its hope for prosperity, social cohesion, and growth in future – makes this nothing short of imperative.

Bibi is right about one thing. The negotiating challenges have become more difficult since Arafat’s refusal of our offer at Camp David. Arafat is no longer alive. Palestinian politics have become ever more fragmented and messy, not least as a result of the Hamas takeover of Gaza.

But Churchill once said that the difference between a pessimist and an optimist was that the pessimist always saw difficulties in every opportunity. The optimist saw opportunities in the difficulties.

I, of all people, do not look at such opportunities without hard-headed

analysis, even a dose of scepticism. But the opportunities are undeniably there, and never has Israel risked paying a higher price for failing to see and at least to try to act on them.

The first port of call should still be the Palestinians. I have repeatedly asked Bibi, and the right-wing rivals that seem often to loom large in his political calculations: "If you're so sure you don't have a negotiating partner in the Palestinians, who not at least try? Seriously. What do you have to lose?"

But beyond this, there is a whole range of relatively moderate countries – and, as Sunni states, strongly anti-Iranian countries – which share with Israel a real, practical interest in putting in place a new political arrangement in the Middle East. So does the United States, Russia, even China. Each, in their own ways, is threatened by a terror threat that will require international action, and many years, finally to defeat.

A Saudi "peace plan", for instance, has been on the table for years. Formally endorsed by the Arab League, it proposes a swap: Israeli withdrawal for full and final peace and Arab recognition. Successive Israeli governments have dismissed it out of hand, arguing that the withdrawal which the Saudi proposal demanded – every inch of territory, back to the borders before the Six-Day War – would be not only politically unacceptable, but practically impossible.

In the final days of the Camp David summit, as our failure was becoming inescapably clear, a disheartened Bill Clinton said to me that he could understand, just about, why Yasir Arafat had not accepted the unprecedentedly far-reaching proposals I had presented. But what he couldn't grasp was how the Palestinian leader could say no even to accepting them as a *basis* for the hard, further work which we all knew a final peace agreement would entail. Wasn't Arafat capable of looking beyond the political risks, of understanding the greater risks of inaction. Of seeing the rewards? Of *looking ahead*?

My fear – not just on issues like the Saudi peace plan, but in charting our place in a dramatically changed world, and safeguarding our twin Jewish and democratic identities at home, pairing our physical strength with an equally strong moral centre – is that we Israelis are now in danger of jettisoning the example of David Ben-Gurion. For Yasir Arafat's.

Moments of Truth

Chapter Outline

The body of the book will be, stylistically, similar to the draft preface. It will be a compelling narrative of both my life and my country's. Yet it will also weave in at each stage the lessons, from both our successes and failures, which I have come to believe are essential to rescuing Israel from its current challenges and redeeming the ethos on which the state was fought for and founded.

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Preface: Patterned on the attached draft preface, though amended, and sharpened, as part of the final manuscript.

Chapter One: *Boy in Palestine*

Childhood in Mishmar Hasharon, with my four younger brothers, in a Zionist/Socialist kibbutz in the centre of Israel, where my first, vivid memories, are as a six-year-old during the 1948 War of Independence and the creation of the modern State of Israel. The influence of my two wonderful, if in ways very different, parents. They did share one, terrible bond: both of their own parents had been murdered in Europe before each made their way to pre-state Palestine. This chapter will explore the effect of Israel's first war, and of the ethos which enveloped and was reinforced by it, in turning a serious, and introverted, child – a future mathematician or scientist, I am sure my parents assumed – into an unlikely soldier. And the effect of the aftermath of the war, especially the disappearance of our nearest Arab neighbours and the absorption of their village into our own and another nearby kibbutz, on planting the seeds of a future peacemaker as well.

Chapter Two: *Raising My Hand*

My unlikely, almost accidental, first steps as a soldier, then just 17 and still needing my mother's written permission for me to sign up. It involved a nearly forgotten, but over time hugely important, incident that very nearly led to war with the Egyptians in February 1960. It came barely two months into my *Private Benjamin* experience of boot camp, and seven years before Israel's real, Six-Day War with the Egyptians, Syrians and Jordanians. It was known as the *Rotem* crisis, from the military codename for the Israeli response, once that actually happened. Amid huge uncertainty among Israeli political and military leaders, the Egyptians had moved a major ground force into the then-demilitarised Sinai. Israel's military intelligence had completely dropped the ball, until a tip-off from

the CIA station chief in Tel Aviv. Several thousand Israeli troops were then ordered southward – including units from the Negev Desert town of Beersheba, where I was doing my basic training. Obviously, the deployed units would need munitions, so convoys were organised. The problem was that no one seemed prepared, or willing, to lead a long line of supply vehicles south, on unfamiliar territory, on a moonless night. So I volunteered – to the amazement of my officers and, even more so, the battalion commander. "Just give me a map and a compass," I said, with more confidence than I actually felt, despite my scouting forays as a kid back on the kibbutz. Somehow, we got there. This chapter will also start to develop the broader themes of the book: Israel's military, and political, response to the enemies around it; the importance of, and the disturbing failures in, a military intelligence apparatus that, years later, I would lead and modernise; and the alarming reluctance of even those intelligence or operational officers who *did* understand the situation to speak up to the top brass or our political leaders, presumably for fear of jeopardising their careers. This same problem would recur, with disastrous effects, in the run-up to the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The chapter will end with my transfer – more respected by my officers, and more self-confident as well – into the fledgling commando unit called *Sayeret Matkal*.

Chapter Three: *Under Cover of Darkness*

A definition not just of the kinds of operations I joined, and would soon lead, in Israel's main commando unit, but of the unit itself, whose very existence was kept secret even from Israelis for its first decade. This chapter will tell the inside story of *Sayeret Matkal*'s birth, on the model of an even smaller group, called Unit 101, formed in the 1950s by Arik Sharon but disbanded amid enormous controversy after a reprisal raid into West Bank ended with the killing of dozens of Arab civilians. *Matkal* was, from the start, guided by the need to be pinpoint-careful in everything we did: preparations, training and, perhaps above all, intelligence, which became an early facet of our cross-border missions onto enemy territory. We also assumed a key role in evaluating weaponry and other battlefield equipment and, increasingly, in recommending how to improve them. All these were elements both in the development of Israel's armed forces and my own progression from a young, slight teenager into a central figure in one of the country's top military units. This chapter will also allow personal insights into other military/political figures who will play a role later in the book: from Arik Sharon to Yitzhak Rabin, who as a senior army officer was a critically important voice in advocating the establishment of *Sayeret Matkal*.

Chapter Four: *New Threat*

The *Rotem* crisis had served as a reminder of what everyone in Israel assumed was the country's principal security challenge: a conventional war with one, or perhaps all, of our neighbouring enemy states, Egypt and Syria and Jordan. My early years in *Matkal*, however, served as a dramatic education for me in the need to avoid superimposing one's own military or political preconceptions on the *real* threats. This chapter will tell the story, as I assumed a more important role in the unit and became its deputy-commander, of how our clandestine intelligence and military operations gave us an insight, years before such dangers would be more widely recognised, of the threat of *irregular* warfare, and the need to apply a mix of intelligence, preparation and careful, dispassionate judgement in order to confront it.

Chapter Five: *Two Kinds of War*

The chapter will open with the outbreak of the most serious, and transformative, conventional conflict in Israel's young history: the Six-Day War of 1967. It will tell of my role – then dividing my time between *Matkal* and my math and science degree at Hebrew University. Like my fellow commandos, I'd had little conventional training since joining the unit, but knew, or at least hoped, we would be called upon. I was mobilised three weeks before the war. I was put in charge of a reconnaissance team in Sinai for the first four days of the fighting, then shifted north for the final capture and securing of the Golan Heights, bordering Syria. I will reflect on the sudden change caused by Israel's comprehensive victory – not only in our strategic position, but in the psychology of our country and its people. And I will describe how, within just a couple of years, we encountered a powerful confirmation that security is not simply about the acquisition of territory – a theme I will pursue and develop throughout the book. I will chart my post-war role in *Sayeret Matkal,* first in dealing with the irregular border conflict known as the War of Attrition, and then in framing and executing our response to the Palestinian terror attacks which began with the El Al hijacking to Algiers in 1968 and, in the Munich Olympics massacre of 1972 by the PLO group called Black September, inexorably escalated. I will describe how these terror operations prompted a whole range of counter-measures – including my vetoed plan to assassinate Arafat, as well as my cross-dressing role, by then as commander of *Sayeret Matkal*, in the assassination of the key figures behind Black September. The chapter will end with my taking a further, academic, break, for a Stanford University graduate degree in engineering and economic systems, only to find myself rushing back home at the outbreak of another conventional war. But this one was different in almost every way Israel's

six-day victory of a few years earlier: the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

Chapter Six: *Near-Death Experience*

My account of how a combination of post-Six-Day-War hubris, and intelligence failures that made *Rotem* seem almost trivial, left Israel open to the surprise attack by Syria and Egypt which, at least in its opening days, appeared to threaten us with defeat. Also a reflection on whether the decision by King Hussein of Jordan, with whom I would later become close, was the one thing that may have saved us from that defeat. How, as soon as my jet back from California had landed, I set about assembling a tank battalion staffed by other Israelis who had been overseas when the war broke out. The story of my tank unit's role in helping, first, to turn back the advance by Egyptian forces, then to push them back across the Suez Canal and finally to encircle and defeat them. This chapter will also go into the lapses in intelligence and leadership before the war, and how, for many years afterwards, I remained determined, both in uniform and in government, to raise my voice on issues of security, in the very broadest sense, even if the things I was saying made colleagues or superiors uneasy and thus might risk blocking my own career advancement.

Chapter Seven: *Going Regular*

This chapter will open with my final direct involvement in commando operations, when, having returned from completing my resumed Stanford MA, I planned the 1976 hijack-rescue operation by *Sayeret Matkal* in Entebbe, Uganda. It would prove a turning-point for me. Technically, I was no longer *Matkal* chief, but had begun my rise up Israel's central command ladder, as a senior officer in, and soon the head of, military intelligence. But at the insistence of the then-commander of the paratroop and infantry division, Dan Shomron, I, rather than my former *Matkal* deputy, Bibi Netanyahu's older brother Yoni, was put in overall charge of the preparations for Entebbe. This chapter will go on to chart the growing importance, in my new role no less than while leader of the commando unit, of focusing our intelligence and operational planning not so much on our conventional enemies but on the growing threat from Yasir Arafat's PLO in a civil-war-weakened Lebanon. I'll describe how, despite a mix of scepticism and simple disinterest from many around me, I singled out the longer-term need to take account of religiously based Islamic forces both there and more widely in the Arab world. The chapter will conclude with my role as the army's Head of Planning – alongside the battlefield general whose unit I'd helped support in the Sinai in 1973, Ariel Sharon – in the preparation for Israel's full-scale invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Chapter Eight: *A War Too Far*

The story of the war in Lebanon, an ostensibly limited push some 15 miles north of our border which culminated in our Lebanese allies' massacre of thousands of civilians in Beirut's Palestinian refugee camps, and in Israeli forces remaining in Lebanon for nearly 20 years afterwards. It will include an account of my military role, as deputy commander of the corps that engaged Syrian forces in Lebanon when the war began. This chapter, however, will also build on lessons I will have foreshadowed in earlier chapters: the dangers for military commanders and politicians of ignoring or misconstruing intelligence, or simply sage advice, and believing what they *want* to be true; failures in planning; the inevitable risk that the deployment of a huge military force will create situations where orders, whatever they are and wherever they come from, get obscured or overtaken by events on the ground. The need to plan not just for a war, but for what comes when the guns have fallen silent – in this case, not only the effects on Israeli forces but the emergence, with the operational hobbling of Arafat's PLO, of the Iranian- and Syrian-backed Shiite Muslim force, Hizbollah. And, above all, the need to disentangle our concept of security from the mere conquest of territory. I will cover in detail the mis-steps that led to Israel's getting mired in Lebanon for 18 years – and the lessons which I hoped, wrongly in the case of some of our leading military and political figures, would be learned from what happened.

Chapter Nine: *Questions of Palestine... and America*

The aftermath of the Lebanon war, with Israel's focus shifting increasingly to an issue even closer to home: the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Already a member of the 22-strong general staff, I became Deputy Chief-of-Staff, the second-highest-ranked soldier in Israel, under Chief of Staff Dan Shomron, my comrade in planning the Entebbe attack. With my even closer colleague, Rabin, as Defence Minister, I played a central role in Rabin's response to the period that would become known as the "first *intifada*", a surge of violence which began with stones and broken bottles but soon escalated to involve Molotov cocktail attacks on Israeli positions in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967. This chapter will chart the evolution of Israel's response: initially guided by the expectation that a quick, sharp show of force would end the violence; then to Rabin's controversial, but necessary shift away from the use of arms to riot-control batons that would "break the bones" of the insurgent groups of young Palestinians. And, finally, to a recognition that long-term stability would require some form of political answer as well. This chapter will also deal with the critical role of Israel's relations with the United States – not only as

regards any resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but in military terms as well. I will detail my role as the main Israeli military liaison with President George Bush's White House during the first Gulf War – a war in which our own lessons from Lebanon were, in fact, applied and where, in contrast to the second Iraq conflict under President Bush's son, great emphasis was placed not just on securing military victory but on planning, politically, for what might come next. The chapter will conclude with my own promotion, shortly afterwards, to Israel's top military post: Chief of Staff.

Chapter Ten: *Raising My Voice, Shedding My Uniform*

The story of my final few years as Israel's highest-ranked, and most decorated, soldier. Particularly, my close relationship with Rabin, who moved on as I did, in his case from Defence Minister to Prime Minister. This chapter will chart the beginnings of what would become the high-point of Israel's efforts to negotiate peace with the Palestinians, with the signing of the Oslo Accords of 1993. Picking up on themes introduced in earlier chapters, I will describe how – even to the occasional consternation of Rabin – I insisted on making my voice heard not just about the new opportunities afforded by Oslo, of which I had no doubt, but the potential snags and even possible dangers that could follow. I'll describe my involvement, as Chief of Staff, and the virtual exclusion of Rabin's longtime rival Shimon Peres, in two negotiating initiatives about which I had no such hesitation. The first was Rabin's nearly successful attempt to secure a breakthrough with Syria; the second, the peace treaty that was negotiated and signed with Jordan's King Hussein. The chapter will conclude with my retirement from the military and – at Rabin's insistence, much more quickly than I had expected or wanted – my entry into the political arena, as Minister of Internal Affairs in his government. And I'll describe how, when I persisted in arguing that I should take a longer break before joining his cabinet, Yitzhak, more prophetically than either he or I could have imagined, replied: "Ehud, in politics, and in life, you never know what might happen."

Chapter Eleven: *Murder in Tel Aviv*

The chapter will begin with Yitzhak Rabin's assassination barely three months later, by a right-wing Israeli after a pro-peace rally in the heart of Tel Aviv. It will track back to my relationship with Rabin during my brief time in his government, including a tense period during which I'd angered him by refusing to go along with a further post-Oslo "interim" agreement. This stand would later lead to Arafat's assumption that I was against a Palestinian state – whereas, as Rabin understood, my actual concern was based on the lack of any overall

coherence in the provisions of successive interim agreements, and of any reliable sign of where the process was headed. I felt strongly that we needed, instead, to focus on the core issues with the Palestinians, in pursuit of a full, final two-state peace treaty. I'll also provide insights into the tense relationship between Rabin and Peres. This chapter will chart my own full-scale entry into the delicately poised peace process, as Foreign Minister under Peres. My initial face-to-face meetings with Arafat, and with Bill Clinton – a man about whom, when Rabin first met him as a presidential candidate, he confided doubts, but with whom he had come to work closely, and to like and admire enormously. I'll provide an insider's view of Peres's unwise decision to resist going for a new electoral mandate after Rabin's assassination; why he ultimately abandoned efforts to restart peace talks with Syria; the eruption of a campaign of Palestinian bomb attacks inside Israel; and Peres's defeat at the polls to the Likud, making one of my early junior officers in *Sayeret Matkal*, Bibi Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister.

Chapter Twelve: *Silence of the Lambs*

An account of Netanyahu's first Prime Ministership, beginning with the promise of a younger, tougher alternative to Peres, but soon meandering into negotiating difficulties with the Palestinians and a fraying of Israel's relations with President Clinton, Secretary of State Albright and the rest of the American diplomatic team, as well as with Arafat. Also the story of my ascendancy, despite all expectations given Shimon Peres's record of never having lost an internal Labour Party election, to leadership of Israel's main opposition party. The chapter title is a reference to a speech I made, as Labor leader, in the Knesset, in which I challenged senior former military figures in the Likud like Sharon to speak up, and to press Bibi. Not just on strategy towards the Palestinians, but on an issue which I was sure that they, like I, fully understood: the need finally to extricate our army from Lebanon. More broadly, I tried to convince them, and my country, that, in our failure to extricate ourselves from Lebanon and at least to try to secure a negotiated peace with the Palestinians, we were risking, Titanic-like, a collision with the political and security equivalent of an iceberg.

Chapter Thirteen: *Moments of Truth*

The story of my two years as Prime Minister. A detailed account of how, drawing on all the key lessons of my military and political life, I entered office determined to value action over rhetoric; and accomplishments, especially in the peace process, over the mere desire to stay in power. I genuinely believed that if I could demonstrate real, historic progress on the first count, the second

would take care of itself. No matter how often elections had been won on fear, my own sense of my country, not to mention the opinion polling, left me in no doubt that given the choice, most Israelis would choose hope. And peace. An account of my early talks with Clinton, in which I set out my plan to make good on a campaign pledge to pull out of Lebanon; then to push for peace agreements, first with Syria and afterwards, though being careful not to ignore them altogether in the meantime, with Arafat and the Palestinians. I will include behind-the-scenes details of our so-nearly-successful effort to get a peace deal with Syria; our fourteen, high-pressure days of negotiations with Arafat at Camp David; the post-summit talks between my top negotiators and Arafat's; the eruption of a more deadly "second intifada" after the summit; and finally the early national election in which the Likud, now under Arik Sharon, emerged victorious.

Chapter Fourteen: *Return to Duty*

This chapter will begin with my return to front-line politics, as Defence Minister, in 2007 – briefly under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert but mostly under the returning Likud Prime Minister, Bibi Netanyahu. It will track back to wrap in my interlude outside of public life, in private business; and explain how and why I returned to a front-line political role, alarmed at Israel's increasingly fragile position at home and abroad and determined to try to help complete the tasks I'd left unfinished as Prime Minister. Before I withdrew from politics for good, in 2013, I would become the longest-serving Defence Minister in Israel's history, if only by a few months more than my friend Yitzhak Rabin. This chapter will provide an inside account of the enormous security and political challenges which occurred on my watch – notably, the war we waged against Hamas in Gaza beginning in December 2008. As throughout the book, I will provide an unvarnished view, explaining, for instance, why Israeli government ministers and military chiefs, myself among them, decided to launch the offensive. But I will also draw lessons from some of the controversies that arose from the Gaza war. Lessons which, I became increasingly convinced the longer I remained in Netanyahu's government, were unlikely to be heeded.

Chapter Fifteen: *Perils in Zion*

Some of the lessons were purely military. And in keeping with a role I'd first assumed as *Matkal* commander, I took a lead in pressing hard for them to be addressed. Chiefly, despite resistance from the Air Force in particular, I pushed for development and deployment, with an important boost from the Americans, of the anti-missile defence system known as Iron Dome. Yet as new security

threats spread throughout the region – political violence in Egypt, Syria and some Gulf Arab states; not to mention the possibility of a nuclear Iran – I strived to impress upon Prime Minister Netanyahu and his top ministers the need for a security strategy that *went beyond* mere weapons. A coherent *political* direction of travel, that recognised, among other things, that only by addressing the alarming divisions inside Israel, and doing everything possible to negotiate peace with our neighbours, could Israel remain truly secure in future.

This final chapter will tell of my decision to leave the government, when I finally realised it was impossible to persuade Bibi Netanyahu and his most influential Likud ministers to consider such a change of course. As the chapter title suggests, I will describe the range of threats facing Israel and explain why our military strength alone cannot address them. I will set out the new *military* strategy which I believe is needed in order for Israel – as well as countries like the US, Russia, China and others – to address new supranational dangers like the spread of Al-Qaeda and ISIS-style terror; as well as the possibility that, if Iran and other Gulf states were to go nuclear, such weaponry might find its way into the hands of terrorists. But I will also explain, as I did behind closed doors during my final years in government, the *political* imperatives I believe to be equally important. Specifically, why it has become even more urgent since when I was Prime Minister for us to attempt a genuine "end of conflict" peace with any and all of our Arab enemies who prove able, willing and equal to joining us in such agreements. In explaining the political and diplomatic opportunities for a change of course by Israel, and passionately putting the case for such a shift, I will go beyond mere generalities, drawing on specific insights from my long experience in the senior ranks of Israel's military and political establishments – in effect bringing my story to its natural close.

The chapter, and the book, will conclude with a flashback to Mishmar Hasharon: a boy's-eye view of what Zionism then represented. Hope. A people with ancient roots, so recently slaughtered by the millions, taking control of their destiny and creating a modern state that would be the pride of those who lived there, and admired by the world. Then, back to the present-day Israel: unimaginably more powerful militarily; with an undeniable need to remain that way. But also divided. Its inhabitants, tense. Angry. Even, sometimes, hateful to one another. Thriving economically, yet with uncertainty ahead on that front as well.

A country that appears to have forgotten some of the most important lessons of our early years as a state: that no matter how great the threats we face, we aren't going anywhere. That only through a marriage of our two kinds of strength

– military and moral – can we remain united, secure, and truly strong. Perhaps most worryingly, in a development actively fuelled by a new generation of career politicians in the mould of Bibi Netanyahu, we seem to have put at risk our greatest weapons of all: a forward-looking sense of national purpose, and national self-confidence.